

Design is practice and theory, not practice with theory

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Background and rationale

There is current international debate, for example Reinventing Design Education in the University, (Young, 2000) about the nature of theory and practice in design education. Many specialist practice based design courses adopt a system of theory being taught as a separate subject, usually called contextual studies. This results in many students treating contextual studies as completely separate from their main purpose, which is practice. However, other courses approach the subject from a broader perspective, teaching students through a combination of practice and theory. This ensures that theory is embedded in practice, and that knowing why is as important as knowing how. This project compared the way design courses incorporate theory and looked at staff perception of teaching theory.

The research

One of the project aims was to discover whether students benefit from being taught a merger of theory and practice, rather than theory as a support subject to practice. Swanson (2000) states that 'Clearly many design teachers and many design students see "academic" classes as time stolen from their true purpose – the design studio'.

The investigation attempted to discover if teaching theory with practice is more beneficial to learners than teaching theory as a supplementary study.

One of the issues raised at the QAA review of the School of Art and Design was that the quality of contextual studies was inconsistent across the school and that, in some programs, contextual studies was delivered as a separate strand (QAA 2000).

Findings of the investigation could provide a model for more effective theory and practice teaching within the School of Art and Design; for example, to support the teaching of design as a combination of theory and practice.

The study was small in scale and exploratory, to establish what was understood by the word theory, if the relationship between theory and practice was problematic and how staff approached the teaching of theory and practice related to practice-based design courses. It also aimed to ascertain if research into the relationship between theory and practice was worth pursuing to a larger study covering other institutions.

Colleagues were interviewed for their views on the teaching of theory, what constitutes theory and the role of contextual studies in design courses. The interviews were semi-structured; the prompt questions were designed to elicit their views on theoretical/contextual studies related to vocational courses.

Other views, using subject specific and general literature, from education and industry, nationally and internationally, were sought using both traditional and on-line search procedures. Opinions regarding what constitutes theory, the need for theory in practice-based courses, and the relationship between theory and practice in such courses were analysed alongside the information from interviews with colleagues.

The outcomes

Summary of findings

The literature seems to find theory to be the holy trinity of theory, history and criticism (Whitehouse, 2000) – abstract, but essential and related to society and culture.

Both the literature and the interviews suggest that historical/contextual studies relate to practice and that practice without it is shallow and unrelated to society or culture. The staff interviewed were concerned with restyling as the result of this. It could be that although it is agreed contextual studies is relevant to practice, many students do not want to be socially or culturally aware but want to get on with making and that is why staff interviewed were so concerned about restyling.

The evidence suggests that theory could be described as ways of thinking and understanding the cultural and social influences on design. Theory can be for theory's sake or it can be the theories and concepts that inform the thinking and understanding that go towards producing an artifact.

Design education in craft and software skills is vocational training. Preparing students for work in the field of design requires them to develop cultural, historical and social understanding. Without this students would be unable to articulate the reasoning behind their work and would only be prepared for technician level positions with no further development envisaged.

Some awareness of historical context is necessary to prevent the production of works with no reference points – similar to producing a paper with no acknowledgement of other people's work used. Historical context is also necessary to inform the broader understanding needed to weather the unpredictable future with the rapid development of technology. Without this, a more generalist education could also lead to restyling rather than re-thinking, developing a shallow approach to the wider subject area.

Students run the risk of becoming absorbed in making without understanding wider issues, resulting in surface styling/restyling, work lacking significance or meaning. Theory enriches practice, lifts it from the superficial and helps ensure work from design courses is current and relevant.

The relationship between theory and practice in design is not new and not everyone considers theory to be an important part of design practice. This view was not reflected in any of the interviews.

Some educationalists and design professionals consider that it is important to prepare students for the needs of industry, with vocational skills, and that theory would detract from that focus. Industry requires designers to be prepared for the demands of the job whereas the majority of design educators, as demonstrated by course content, are not solely concerned with vocational skills and knowledge, but with enabling students to fulfil their potential, their long-term prospects. As Bassnett (2003) puts it: '... a set of transferable skills essential to this inter-cultural age. Any good degree gives students more than subject knowledge. It gives you a life skill: how to think.'

There are various models for teaching theory: theory in isolation; theory and practice integrated; theory taught separately but with a planned relationship, theoretically and physically, with practical work.

Theory taught as a distinct discipline can result in students not making the connection between the two and therefore producing superficial work, lacking depth and understanding.

Theory combined with practice or taught separately by specialists, in a planned way, with links into the practical work, was seen as beneficial in that it enabled students to synthesise practical and theoretical aspects of courses.

Persuading students of the benefits of contextual studies was identified as a problem. Many students saw contextual studies as detracting from their main purpose – practice. As students equate written work with theory, replacing essays and their equivalent with practical assessed outcomes to theoretical study was considered a way of persuading students to engage with contextual studies. This would also be a way of making the connection between theory and practice rather than relating thinking to theory and making to practice in that it relates making to theory. Dilnot relates thinking to practice when he asserts: ‘... design is a thinking activity, in that design studio practice is... not simply a making but a complex enactive activity in which what is made simultaneously helps us (re-) conceptualise our intentions. It is not a long step from that to being able to see design action as itself a mode of thinking, or better perhaps, as that which enables a certain kind of thinking to come into being.’ (Dilnot, 2000 p9)

Conclusion

In the context of this paper, theory is used as a term to describe many aspects of design education: historical, critical and theoretical studies. It can mean different things depending on the course it relates to or the interpretation put on it by the staff involved. However, it is not practice, it does not produce a designed object – or does it?

There is an indication that by assessing contextual aspects of a course by practical means, students would be more likely to engage with theory. The evidence suggests that this would not help the problem of relating theory to practice in courses which have a predominant ethos of making. There would still be a need to convince students of the material status of theories, to make them more palatable and nearer to the physical activity of making which many students regard as their sole purpose.

Evidence from literature and the interviews suggests theoretical/contextual studies are considered essential. Without theoretical/contextual content design education would be limited to training in craft and software skills. This could only result in narrow specialism, training for a vocation which, with the pace of change increasing particularly in technological areas, could result in a specialism being out-of-date before completion of the course. Some of the literature challenges this but not so the interviewees. There are indications that industry needs graduates with practical skills and knowledge and that theory would hinder students’ development of those skills.

The designed material object is part of the cultural, social, political and economic world which we are part of and therefore cannot be ignored in the study of designing. If design is not related to the world it inhabits it does not serve its purpose and is superficial and meaningless.

Apart from the important contextual nature of theory, there are other more pragmatic reasons for its inclusion in the practice curriculum. It may be a resource for practical work as an information gathering and analysis exercise for ideas generation and development. Also, theory brings an awareness of design, past and present, which may act as a reference system for design work, resulting in an informed, active, creative approach to design problems rather than a superficial restyling exercise.

There is evidence from the literature of a view that theory distracts the maker from practice and also that it can remove the focus from preparing students for careers in design. This relates to the message from industry that skills are highly valued by employers.

There is a need for theory to be included in the design curriculum and the information so far suggests that although there are arguments for teaching theory as a stand-alone subject, most literature discusses the advantages of theory being integrated with practice. One of the problems associated with this seems to be the vocational nature of some courses which require considerable subject specific knowledge and skills, leaving little space in the curriculum for integration of theory. However, the most effective way of incorporating

theory into practice seems to be theory taught as a discreet subject but with careful planning so that it is firmly linked to the practical curriculum both theoretically and physically. This ensures the depth of specialist contextual knowledge required is available rather than subject-specific theoretical knowledge delivered by specialist practitioners. This would operate concurrently with some theory embedded in practice-based modules, taught by practitioners – developing the ‘mixed model’ proposed by the first interviewee.

Design practice and theory have to work together if what we regard as practice is worth doing, if it is going to contribute something worthwhile to society and culture.

Whatever model is adopted for including theory with practice, each subject would develop its own way of ensuring incorporation into the curriculum, informed by examples of good practice. This would be preferable to a one-size-fits-all approach which would limit the range and depth of contextual studies students encounter on certain courses or in certain institutions. Stand-alone contextual studies modules could be tailored to particular needs, inter-relating with the theoretical/historical content of practice-based modules.

Design courses do seem to be moving gradually towards a more integrated approach to theory and practice, as the first interviewee said: ‘The divide may not be as great as we think.’

Benefits

The research has provided evidence that suggests that mergers of theory and practice can be successful and beneficial to learners and staff. It suggests that students would benefit from theory embedded in practice or taught as a separate discipline but within the studio environment so that it is seen as related to practice rather than as an entirely separate knowledge set.

Some of the findings suggest that the future of design education is of a broader nature than it is currently in many areas, that students need to ensure a wide range of knowledge in order to place their work in cultural and social context and to ensure they are prepared for a changing employment market.

Both of these findings may be used to inform future curriculum development within the School of Art and Design, providing an opportunity to ensure consistency of quality of contextual studies.

Evaluation

Colleagues have evaluated the research at various stages. They have compared the findings to their own experiences of contextual studies related to studio practice. Staff who contributed to the evaluation process stated the findings would be useful when writing or modifying module content and outcomes as well as when considering programmes of study and pathways.

The study would have benefited from interviews with a wider range of staff from other design courses. The interviews for this paper were with staff from different design specialist courses, but a further study would need to concentrate on one discipline for a more thorough study of theory and practice.

Future developments

The study was exploratory, it is envisaged the information will be used as a foundation for a further study investigating the relationship between theory and vocational aspects of courses.

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